The Marital Relationship and Marital Quality

- Associated with both psychological and physical health.
- Marital quality is multidimensional:
  - Positive marital experiences
  - Negative marital experiences
- It has a developmental trajectory over time; includes ups and downs.

Marital Relationship and Autism

- Couples that have a child with autism have unique parenting experiences
- Little is known about how these unique experiences affect and are affected by the parent’s couple relationship

Family Outcomes in Autism Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th>Time 2 - 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observational Video</td>
<td>Observational Video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14-Day Daily Diary</td>
<td>5 min speech samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Surveys</td>
<td>Teacher Surveys</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our Families

- On average, relationship length was 11.30 years
- Families had 2.41 kids on average
- The child with autism was on average 7.88 years old at time on 1
- 87.3% of children were boys, 34.4% had a diagnosis of intellectual disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>189 Families with a Child with Autism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (M[SD])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No HS Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Degree or equivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates or Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (M[SD])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No HS Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Degree or equivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates or Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison Group

- On average, relationship length was 11.91 years
- Families had 2.55 kids on average
- The child was on average 7.99 years old
- 83.4% of children were boys, 0.0% had a diagnosis of intellectual disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>174 Families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (M[SD])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No HS Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Degree or equivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates or Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (M[SD])</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No HS Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS Degree or equivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates or Bachelor’s Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Five Minute Speech Sample Task

■ “Now I’d like to hear your thoughts and feelings about (partner/spouse’s name), in your own words and without my interrupting with any questions or comments. When I ask you to begin, I’d like you to speak for 5 minutes, telling me what kind of a person (partner/spouse’s name) is and how the two of you get along together. After you begin to speak, I prefer not to answer any questions until after the 5 minutes.”
■ “Do you have any questions before we begin?”
■ “Please begin speaking about (partner/spouse’s name), telling me what kind of a person (partner/spouse’s name) is and how the two of you get along together.”

Themes

Reflections – Marital Joys

■ “He’s a take care of your family kind of guy, very loving, very understanding, like never gets mad. Just very calming person and helps me get through day to day. I can go to him for anything.”
■ “He is a kind hearted person. He’s very funny. Um he’s a very hard worker.”
■ “She is very much my teammate […] so we’ve been together, let’s see we’ve been married, eh eleven years now. Eh, it’s changed some over time due to having kids and our challenges, um but still I know I can still fall back on her as far as support.”
■ “He, is a very considerate person. Um, he’s the type of person that a lot of times thinks about um you or other people over himself, um and puts other people above himself. Um, we’ve been together since high school so we get along very well. Um, He’s my best friend, he knows everything about me, I know everything about him. Um, our love is very strong.”

Reflections – Marital Struggles

■ “He, um, I wish he would help out more with [our child], even though I know he works and most of the stuff we deal with [our child] happens during the day it still gets a little nerve racking when I’m the one that has to do all the running around and take care of all the hard situations when he’s having melt downs.”
■ “So I mean me and him are kinda hanging in there but me and him, he is definitely a hard headed guy.”
■ “And lately it’s just been really tough in the relationship with us. It’s just kinda strained really because of other stressors and health issues that come up with her and the kids and stuff and money has been a big issue. Sometimes I worry that it’s not going to end well or go well. There’s, sometimes I feel that she’s way too critical of herself and then she’s way too critical of us as a couple and myself and almost to the point of hurtful when she’s talking to you.”
■ “She’s smart. She does her job well. Unfortunately her job sometimes she takes it home with her a little too much and it, she needs de-stressors. So we try and figure out how to de-stress her from her job and again, I don’t know.”

Time with Partner

■ Parents of children with autism spend less time with their partner on average
■ 21 min/day difference
Partner Support
- Parents of children with autism, on average, felt equally supported by their spouse as parents in the comparison group.
- “He is always there for me. We make a great team.”
- “When I am frustrated, he will step in. I am always impressed at how he can stay calm.”
- “She’s always willing to do anything to help me out. She takes care of most things around the house.”

Positive and Negative Interactions
- Negative couple interactions: expressing anger or frustration, avoiding or ignoring partner.
  - Similar levels on average.
- Positive couple interactions: sharing a joke or fun activity, enjoying a conversation, hugging/kissing.
  - Parents of children with autism had fewer on average.

Couple Conflict
- Predictor of marital quality.
- Videotaped couple problem-solving task.
- Coded on engagement, enjoyment, positive and negative affect, irritation, cooperation, balance, sensitivity, conflict resolution, and global relationship quality.
- ASD families showed less engagement, cooperation and balance than comparison families.
- ASD families showed greater positive affect and sensitivity than comparison families.

Behaviors During Couple Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Harmful</th>
<th>Helpful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criticism</td>
<td>Provide Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contempt</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defensiveness</td>
<td>Engage in fun activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stonewalling</td>
<td>Willingness to forgive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary
- There are patterns of strengths and resilience.
  - Partners feel supported by one another.
  - Partners show greater positive affect and sensitivity during problem-solving.
- Families also experience some vulnerabilities.
  - Partners spend less time together on average.
  - Less engagement, cooperation and balance during problem-solving.
  - Fathers’ increased use of stalemate.

IMPLICATIONS
Importance of sleep

Parents of children with ASD report poorer sleep quality which can result in less capacity to deal with stress and cope with challenges. Why?

- Child with ASD may have sleep challenges (44-83%)
- Sleep-stress cycle

So?

- Affects view of behaviors
- Effect on positive and negative mood

Importance of Sleep

So what can we do?

- Talk to primary care provider about your sleep
- Talk to your child’s primary care provider about her/his sleep
- Cultivate good sleep habits
  - Sleep schedule
  - Relaxation
  - Limit caffeine and technology
  - Physical activity

Cultivating Effective Social Support

We turn to others for help. Why?

- Critical for optimal parent psychological well-being.

But . . .

- Social support can be positive or negative.

So?

- In two parent households, the partner is the primary source of social support.
- Negative social support from a partner has strongest association with depressive symptoms.

Cultivating Effective Social Supports

So what can we do?

- Increase overall positive social support and decrease negative
- Increase partner positive support (clear communication)
- Talk to family and friends about what is helpful and what is hurtful

Attending to Partner Relationships

Why?

- Healthy couples leads to positive well-being
- Less time together
- Stress leaks

But . . .

- Parents of children with ASD report lower couple satisfaction, more frequent, intense and severe conflicts, increased risk for separation/divorce

So what can we do?

- Debunk myths! Yet acknowledge difficulty. Find hope.
- Find ways to connect!
  - 5 minute check-ins at the end of the day
  - Compliments — increase positives.
- Recognize stress can transfer
Fostering Positive Emotion and Self-Kindness in Daily Life

Why?

- Positive emotion and self-kindness in daily life increases well-being.

What are we talking about?

- Mindfulness.
- Benefit-finding.
- Self-compassion.

What can we do?

- Try out mindfulness, benefit-finding and self-compassion, formally.
- Try out informal ways to practice.
- Keep ourselves healthy.

Collaborators and Funding

- Sigan Hartley
- Lauren Papp
- Nicole Mailick
- Dan Bolt
- Frank Floyd
- Leann DaWalt
- Jan Greenberg
- Emily Schaidle
- Haley Schultz
- Emily Hickey
- Paige Bussanich
- Greta Goetz
- Shari Blumenstock
- Hannah Otalora-Fadner
- Marisa Aronson
- Camara Gregory
- Jasmine Braithwaite
- Molly Palzkill
- Kelly Becker
- Kate Bradley
- Heidi Voelker
- Vinnie Sirocchi
- Karissa Propson
- Sarah Detrich
- Chloe Shymus
- Kasey Hermanson
- Aubrey Fisher
- Megan Geary
- Molly Palzkill
- Sami Petersen
- Kelli Vernick
- Sarah Sales
- bulldog
- Kim Ferraro
- Victoria Reis
- Shari Blumenstock
- Emily Schaidle
- Haley Schultz
- Emily Hickey
- Paige Bussanich
- Greta Goetz
- Shari Blumenstock

We are so very grateful to the families who are willing to share their experiences!

NIHM (R01 MH009190 to S. Hartley)
NICHD (P30 HD03352 to M. Mailick and A. Messing)