Mental Health Comorbidities in Adolescents with ASD: Indirect Effects of Family Functioning through Youth Social Competence

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Recent research has established the high comorbidities of mental health problems in adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD; see Strang et al., 2012), prompting researchers to examine factors that may contribute to elevated anxiety and depression. Given the centrality of the family for individuals with ASD (Greenlee, Winter, & Diehl, 2018) as well as the stage salience of peer relationships during adolescence (Masten et al., 1995), this study focused on the roles of family functioning and social competence in mental health outcomes of verbally-fluent adolescents with ASD.

Some research suggests that adolescents with ASD and without comorbid intellectual disability are interested in social interaction but are also aware of their social limitations and loneliness which have been associated with internalizing problems in youth with ASD (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Vickers et al., 2007; Whitehouse et al., 2009). Although social-communication deficits are an inherent part of an ASD diagnosis, families may still play a role in ASD adolescents’ social competencies and social development. The current study explores the idea that adolescents may learn social skills in part from family experiences, even in the context of ASD, and that the family environment plays a role in adolescents’ social competence.

**Hypothesis:**
Family functioning indirectly impacts adolescent anxiety and depressive symptoms via adolescent social competence for adolescents with ASD.

**PROCEDURES**
- This study used data from the Teens and Parents (TAP) Study (Greenlee, 2019).
- Participants were adolescents aged 13-17 diagnosed with ASD and their primary caregivers (PCs) recruited via the Interactive Autism Network (IAN) and online advertisements on the Autism Speaks website.
- Inclusion criteria stipulated that PCs be female (most PCs enrolled in IAN identify as female), that adolescent-caregiver dyads live together and speak English, and that adolescents have sufficient reading skills to independently complete study procedures.
- Adolescents were excluded if they had comorbid intellectual disability or a genetic disorder.
- PCs and adolescents submitted self-report measures online via REDCap (Harris et al., 2009).
- PCs and adolescents each received a $10 Amazon gift card as compensation for their time.

**RESULTS**
- To test the hypothesized indirect path, we conducted bias-corrected bootstrapping analysis with 5,000 bootstraps using Process 3.0 model 4 (Hayes, 2017) for SPSS.
- Family socioeconomic status, adolescent sex, and restricted and repetitive behaviors were used as covariates in all models (see Table 1).

**REFERENCES**

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