Lay Abstracts

Title: Parent and child perspectives on the nature of anxiety in children and young people with autism spectrum disorders: a focus group study
Authors: Ozsivadjian, Knott and Magiati
DOI: 10.1177/1362361311431703

Lay abstract: Anxiety disorders are common among children and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Despite growing knowledge about the prevalence, phenomenology and treatment of anxiety disorders, relatively little is understood about the nature and impact of anxiety in this group and little is known about autism-specific factors that may play a role in the increased prevalence of anxiety disorders. In this exploratory study, we report on a series of 5 focus groups with 17 parents of children and adolescents with ASD and anxiety. Across groups, parents gave strikingly similar descriptions of the triggers and behavioural signs associated with anxiety. Another consistent finding was that many parents reported that their children had great difficulty expressing their worries verbally and most showed their anxiety through changes in their behaviour. The impact of anxiety was reported to often be more substantial than the impact of ASD itself. The implications of the focus group findings are discussed in relation to existing literature.

Title: Verbal ability, social stress, and anxiety in children with Autistic Disorder
Authors: Lanni and Corbett
DOI: 10.1177/1362361311425916

Lay abstract: Social anxiety is more common in children with autism than children with other developmental disabilities or chronic health conditions. Cortisol, a stress hormone commonly used as a physiological measure of stress, was utilized in the present study to evaluate the stress response of children with autism in comparison to typical development. This was measured using The Trier Social Stress Test–Child version (TSST-C). The TSST-C is designed to evoke a significant cortisol response in healthy participants and is widely used to examine the physiological stress response in clinical populations. Because the TSST-C involves the completion of tasks that employ verbal communication and executive functioning skills, two abilities that are often impaired in autism, these were measured and considered as variables that may influence the stress response. Two groups (one group with autism and one group with typical development), each comprised of fifteen children between the ages of 8 and 12, underwent neuropsychological testing (assessing abilities such as verbal communication, verbal memory, and executive functioning), extended home cortisol sampling (saliva samples collected 4 times per day for six days during a two week period), and
completed the TSST-C. Results indicated that verbal ability did not predict the stress or anxiety responses for either the children with autism or the typical children. Both groups exhibited similar baseline levels of cortisol, and only typically developing children demonstrated a significant increase in cortisol following the TSST-C. Self-reported levels of acute anxiety were not associated with the cortisol stress response exhibited by either group. The overall findings are interpreted within the context of the larger literature on social and cognitive functioning in autism, with a particular emphasis on impaired social cognition. Clinical implications pertaining to the relationship between stress and anxiety as well as treatment potential are discussed.

**Title: Sleep problems in children with autism spectrum problems: A longitudinal population-based study**

**Authors:** Sivertsen, Posserud, Gillberg, Lundervold and Hysing

**DOI:** 10.1177/1362361311404255

**Lay abstract:** This study explored sleep problems in children with autism symptoms. In a large Norwegian study following 3700 children from ages 7-9 to 11-13, the children were assessed for autistic symptoms, sleep problems, and emotional and behavioral problems. About 1% of the children fulfilled the criteria for autism. The frequency of chronic sleep problems was more than ten times higher in autistic children compared to non-autistic children. These children also developed more sleep problems over time: 4 of 10 children without sleep problems at age 7-9 developed such problems 4 years later, compared to less than 1 of 10 among non-autistic children. While emotional and behavioral problems explained a large proportion of the association between sleep problems and autism, children with autistic symptoms had a three-fold increased risk of sleep problems, even when taking into account other explanatory factors, such as gender, family income, parental education, and mental retardation. These findings call for increased awareness of sleep problems in children with autistic symptoms.

**Title: Shall we do this together? Social gaze influences action control in a comparison group, but not in individuals with high-functioning autism**

**Authors:** Schilbach, Eickhoff, Cieslik, Kuzmanovic and Vogeley

**DOI:** 10.1177/1362361311409258

**Lay abstract:** Performing actions in the presence of others automatically changes how we perform these actions. High-functioning autism (HFA) is characterized by impairments of social interaction, which may result from an inability to be affected by the presence of others when performing actions. To explore this, we performed a study in which a group of adults with HFA and a group of typical adults had to perform simple actions (pressing a button) in the presence or absence of a virtual other (i.e. a face) on a computer screen. While the typical adults were found to benefit from the presence of a face (resulting in faster reaction times on the task), this effect was not found in the HFA group. We suggest that this automatic alignment with others may help to foster social interaction and that future research should investigate the absence of such processes in HFA as they could be at the very heart of the difficulties that patients experience in everyday life.
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**Title: Early indicators of autism spectrum disorders at 12 and 24 months of age: A prospective, longitudinal comparative study**

*Authors: Veness, Prior, Bavin, Eadie, Cini and Reilly*

DOI: 10.1177/1362361311399936

**Lay abstract:** Parents of 1,911 children participating in the ‘Early Language in Victoria Study’ in Melbourne, Australia, completed questionnaires about their child’s development from infancy through to school age. At four years of age, a group of children identified with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) were compared to other children from within the study; those with a developmental delay, language impairment, or typical development. Comparisons were made between the children’s early social communication skills (including eye-gaze, non-verbal communication, gesture, and speech skills) at 8 months, 1 year, and 2 years of age. By one year of age children with ASD used fewer early social communication skills than children with typical development. The only social communication skill that was found to be significantly different between children with ASD and all other children, however, was the use of gesture. Children with ASD used fewer gestures for communication than all other children at both 1 and 2 years of age. Reduced use of communicative gesture is an important sign to consider, among other early markers, in the early identification of children with ASD.

**Title: Psychometric properties of the Caregiver Strain Questionnaire (CGSQ) among caregivers of children with autism**

*Authors: Khanna, Madhavan, Smith, Tworek, Patrick and Becker-Cottrill*

DOI: 10.1177/1362361311406143

**Lay abstract:** The purpose of this study was to test the reliability and validity of the Caregiver Strain Questionnaire (CGSQ) among parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The CGSQ is a tool that was originally developed to measure the strain among parents of children with severe emotional and behavioural problems. We collected responses on the CGSQ by surveying families of children with ASD living in the state of West Virginia, United States of America. The CGSQ was found to be reliable (producing the same result repeatedly) when assessing strain among parents of children with ASD. We also found that the CGSQ was valid, in the sense that it actually captured the strain felt by parents of children with ASD. In conclusion, this study found that the CGSQ works well to determine strain among parents of children with ASD.

**Title: The Association of Autism Diagnosis with Socioeconomic Status**

*Authors: Thomas, Zahorodny, Peng, Kim, Jani, Halperin and Brimacombe*

DOI: 10.1177/1362361311413397

**Lay abstract:** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) monitors how many children are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in several states, including New Jersey (NJ). In 2007, CDC reported a higher percentage of children with ASD in NJ than in other states.
We analyzed data from NJ, collected as part of the CDC study, to consider whether there is a difference in the percentage of children with ASD by the income level of their census tract of residence. From school and medical records, we identified 586 children with ASD who were 8 years old in 2000 and 2002. We obtained the number of 8 year olds in NJ and household income information from the year 2000 US Census. The percentages of children with ASD were higher for higher income levels; 17.2 per 1,000 children in census tracts with median income >$90,000, compared with 7.1 per 1,000 children in tracts with median income <$30,000. Children in the higher income tracts had more professional evaluations, but we found a wide range in the number of evaluations at each income level. A model that adjusts for other possible differences in the children suggests that the percentage of children with ASD in the highest income census tract was twice that in the lowest income census tract. Our study could not determine the reason there was more ASD in the wealthier areas, but it could be due to better access to pediatric and developmental services.