Editorial

In this issue of *Autism*, we begin a different format for editorials. Rather than provide a summary of the manuscripts presented herein, we begin a series that we call “Myth Busters.” Our goal is to set the record straight on statistics and figures that somehow are perceived as common wisdom within the autism community, and yet have little basis in fact. In this issue, we address the often-quoted and generally accepted fact of the high prevalence of divorce among parents of children with autism.

Naseef and Freedman (2012) addressed this issue with sensitivity and clarity in the Autism Advocate. They describe the urban legend that the divorce rate among parents of children with autism is 80%, a statistic earnestly quoted by many talk show hosts and celebrities in the United States. Naseef and Freedman point out that having a child with autism can increase parents’ stress relative to parents of typically developing children, and can strain parents’ relationship with each other. This can be a product of changing expectations regarding the care and development of the child with autism, the child’s difficult-to-manage behavior, juggling often hectic therapy schedules, financial challenges, and battling with schools and insurance companies to obtain appropriate care. In the face of these challenges, and a national divorce rate of 40% to 50%, it’s no wonder that people assume a much higher rate of divorce among parents of children with autism.

Carefully conducted research does not bear out this statistic, however. As early as 1951, Kanner remarked on the low incidence of divorce among the families of children with autism he had seen. Freedman and colleagues (2012) used data from a national survey to estimate that 64% of children with autism reside in two-parent households, a percentage no different from that of typically developing children. Because of the way the survey questions were asked, however, they were not able to ascertain the exact divorce rate. Hartley and colleagues (2010) found, in a smaller convenience sample, that 23.5% of parents of children with autism divorced, compared with 13.8% of typically developing children, with the difference between the two groups appearing among parents of children older than 10 years, but not before. Still, the divorce rate among parents of children with autism in this sample was substantially lower than the national average.

*Psychology Today* published a related article in July 2013. The author, Alysia Abbott, the mother of a child with autism, describes how frequently she came across the statistic that 80% of parents of children with autism divorce. Her interviews with other parents in this article highlight the stresses and challenges many families feel, but also the support that many couples can offer each other.

Why is clarifying this misconception important? Because our behavior is heavily influenced by what we believe to be normative. Couples who know another couple who have gotten a divorce are more likely to divorce themselves (McDermott et al., 2013). Divorce takes a heavy emotional and financial toll on families. Couples who think there is more hope for their relationship are more likely to stay married.
None of this is meant to minimize the significant stress and financial burden that many families of children with autism experience. In fact, the focus on the divorce rate is most likely a well-meaning attempt to draw attention to the support these families need. It may have the inadvertent effect of making things worse, however, rather than better.

References


McDermott R, Fowler JH and Christakis NA (2013) Breaking up is hard to do, unless everyone else is doing it too: social network effects on divorce in a longitudinal sample followed for 32 years. Social Forces (in press).