

**Construction and Validation of a Model
for Variables Related to the Adjustment
Among Parents of a Child with Autism**

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is the construction and validation of a model for the adjustment of parents and a child with autism, based on the premise that the birth of a child with autism has adverse effects on family functioning, such as stress and crises. The suggested model is based on theoretical views on stress, and links personal resources, stress, perception, parental adjustment and child adjustment with autism. The family stress approach focuses on the family as a system made up of a dynamic interaction between its members, who constitute interdependent parts of the system, and thus, a change in one family member brings about changes in processes of the entire family system. From this perspective, a rise of new demands in the family and stress in the role of one family member affect the family system as a whole. A review of existing literature suggests that parenting a child with autism induces continuing stress for the parents throughout the life cycle. The current research model is based on components of the double ABCX model and explains the effects of stressful events in terms of an accumulation of stress, the family's perception of the stressful event and the resources at its disposal.

The parents constitute a central and important link in promoting the child's adjustment, as they are the ones who accompany him from birth and throughout the life cycle. Thus the personal and social resources the parents bring with them to the stress situation of parenting a child with autism have a crucial effect on their adjustment on the one hand, and on their child's adjustment on the other. Based on these views, we examined sense of coherence and locus of control as personal-internal resources and social support as a social-external resource as they relate to the stress of parenting a child with autism, and tested their relations to parental adjustment (mental health and quality of marital relationship) and child adjustment. (improvement in child's condition).

According to the model we hypothesized that the resources will be negatively related to stress and positively related to parental and child adjustment. In addition, variables of parental adjustment will be directly and positively related to child adjustment. Thus, according to the model, the more resources the parents have at their disposal, the lower the stress level, the higher the parental adjustment (mental health and quality of marital relationship), and the higher the child's adjustment. In addition, the stress emanating from parenting a child with autism will mediate between the

resources and parental and child adjustment, and parental adjustment will mediate between the stress emanating from parenting a child with autism and the improvement in the child's adjustment.

The research population included 176 parents of children between the ages 6-16 diagnosed by medical-psychiatric professionals as suffering from autism (PDD – Pervasive Developmental Disorders). The sample chosen included parents who responded to a request by organizations and associations treating families of children with autism to participate in the study.

In the current study, each parent was tested individually. Participants filled out a series of questionnaires:

1. Family Inventory of Life Events and Changes
2. Questionnaire of Resources & Stress
3. Antonovsky 's Sense of Coherence Scale
4. Child Improvement Locus of Control questionnaire
5. Social Support Scale
6. Cognitive Evaluation in Stress Situations Scale
7. Family Crisis Oriented Personal Evaluation Scales
8. Mental Health Inventory
9. Evaluating & Nurturing Relationship Issue Communication & Happiness
10. Autism Behavior Checklist
11. Demographic questionnaire.

According to our findings, it seems the core of the parental adjustment process consists of the parent's sense of control affecting stress, mental health and quality of marital relationship, which in turn affect child adjustment. The variables affecting the sense of control, namely sense of coherence, internal locus of control and social support, constitute components of the parent's interpretation that increase the likelihood that he might control stressful situations, and as a result promote his mental health and the quality of his marital relationship.

Mental health and quality of marital relationship as variables affected by the interrelations of preceding factors (sense of coherence, locus of control and social support) on the one hand and include realms of parental emotion, cognition and behavior on the other, create an elaboration of the stress situation's interpretation components, increase the parent's perception of his ability to control stressful

situations emanating from parenting a child with autism, and helps him to generate behaviors conducive to the promotion of his child. Among these two variables, mental health and quality of marital relationship, mental health appears to be more central in promotion of the adjustment of a child with autism. This variable's potency as a direct influence on child adjustment comes from its being the "front" of parental functioning in his direct personal everyday dealings with the care and promotion of his child who suffers from autism.

The main contribution of this study lies in the construction and validation of a multi-dimensional model, linking personal and social variables, stress, parental mental health and quality of marital relationship and child adjustment. The model constructed provides a starting point to understanding systems related to parental and child adjustment. The research findings suggest an understanding of the dynamic of factors operating in these systems as a circular one, in which variables contribute to one another in a circle of success or failure in promoting the mental health and quality of marriage of the parents on the one hand, and their child's adjustment on the other.

Another important contribution lies in identifying the importance of the parent's sense of control in promoting his own and his child's adjustment. Thus we suggest developing a tool to examine valid and reliable measures of control in a specific content domain as well as examining the parent's general sense of control, and the relations between the two. In constructing this tool, we recommend creating an elaboration of the concept of control through reference to primary and secondary control perceptions, causality components and self efficacy. Development of such a tool may lead to a valid measure of sense of control and deepen our understanding on how it affects the mental health and quality of marriage among parents of children with autism and their child's adjustment. Because the quality of marital relationship variable was only partially explained by the concept of control, the quality of marital relationship measure should be enhanced focusing on sense of control. First, the model findings should be validated and a comparison between mothers and father should be conducted in addition to the examination of the individual parent offered in the current study. This will allow an understanding of the interaction between mothers and fathers of children with autism, identifying the sense of control of each. Based on the examination of the parent as an individual and the comparison between mothers and fathers, a dyadic measure may be constructed in further studies to represent the

parents' joint sense of control as a couple, which may assist in understanding the dynamic between them in the process of their own and their child's adjustment.

Understanding the significance of personal and social factors as promoting a sense of control among parents of children with autism and contributing to parent and child adjustment, may help form guidelines for family therapists dealing with parents of children with autism based on the enhancement of parents' control and success systems as well as the success of their child's adjustment. Following this research an intervention program may be suggested that will be based on enhancement of resources which increase the sense of control among parents of children with autism, development of attitudes that generate interpretations conducive to the parent's control and success system, and exposure to experiences of parental success in the process of promoting his child. In addition, this research findings may contribute in the educational domain, in the development of training programs towards an educational approach supporting the parental unit, educating on the adjustment process of parents of children with autism and providing tools for identifying the parent's sources of control and strengthening them.

Application of the current study's recommendations will aid in the enhancement of factors that have the potential for empowering parents and children, alleviating stress, and promoting their adjustment.