

The Individual Differences of Temperament and Parenting Stress in Preschoolers with Autism

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Children with autistic spectrum disorders vary significantly in developmental ability, symptomatology, as well as emotional and behavioral patterns. The large variance in behavioral and emotional patterns poses a major challenge to parents and clinical workers while interacting with children with autism. This research tested whether temperament, as an important area in understanding the individual differences of normal children, poses a unique contribution to the stress of parenting in children with autism. Forty-five Chinese mothers of male preschoolers diagnosed as autism (CA = 3 yr. 1 mo. to 7 yr. 7 mo.; MA = 1 yr. 5 mo. to 6 yr. 3 mo.) residing in Taiwan completed the Behavioral Style Questionnaire (BSQ-Chinese version; Carey & McDevitt, 1978), the Chinese Children Developmental Inventory (CCDI; Hsu & Hsu, 1976), the Clancy Checklist (Chinese version; Hsieh, Soong, & Hsu, 1983), and the Parenting Stress Index–Short Form (PSI/SF, Abidin, 1995) for assessing temperament, developmental age, autistic symptomatology, and perceived parenting stress, respectively. Results indicated acceptable internal consistency and six-month test-retest reliability of BSQ subscales for assessing autistic population. Compared with the BSQ scores of 243 normal male preschoolers between age five and seven residing in Taipei (Wang, 2003), preschoolers with autism received significantly higher scores in activity level ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.01$) and intensity of reaction ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.09$), and poorer scores in rhythmicity ($M = 4.23$, $SD = .79$), adaptability ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.02$), and attention span and persistence ($M = 3.44$, $SD = .97$). They were also less likely to be distracted ($M = 3.94$, $SD = .95$). In addition, larger group variances were found in the autistic sample on the dimensions of activity level, adaptability, quality of mood ($M = 4.70$, $SD = .96$), threshold of responsiveness ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.08$), and intensity of reaction. None of the dimensions yielded smaller variance for the autistic group than their normal counterparts. The severity of autistic symptomatology was significantly correlated with four BSQ dimensions, namely, activity level, adaptability, distractibility, and approach/withdrawal ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.02$), $r_s = .30, -.30, -.55, -.41$, $ps < .05$. The fact that there was a fair range of within-group temperamental differences among children with autism and that there were five BSQ dimensions not significantly related to autistic symptomatology yields that some of the BSQ dimensions may be regarded as independent constructs from the autistic symptomatology. In addition, hierarchical regression analyses yielded that after controlling for developmental ability and symptomatology, the dimensions of activity level, quality of mood, threshold of responsiveness, and intensity of reaction were still significant predictors for parenting stress. These four temperamental dispositions thus may be especially effective in predicting stressful parenting. This study also suggested that the dimensions of distractibility and threshold of responsiveness in BSQ may need to further break up into several distinctive aspects to better grasp the individual differences among children with autism.

Keywords: autism, individual differences, parenting stress, temperament

