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Relationship between empowerment and mental health of parents with children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

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Introduction

Children with ASD have pervasive problems in social, communication, behavioral and emotional aspects, and this often makes caregiving a long-term, exhausting task. It has well been documented in researches that parents with ASD children are more stressed than those with children with other disabilities. Recent studies (e.g. MacMullin et al., 2010) indicate empowerment, which is defined as a process by which families access knowledge, skills, and resources that enable them to gain positive control over their own lives (Singh, 1995), plays an important role in relieving parental depression and stress.

Objectives

This study was 1) to understand the structure of parents' perceived empowerment, and 2) to investigate the relationship between parent empowerment and mental health. It was hypothesized that parents with higher perceived level of empowerment would be less depressed and stressed.

Methodology

Subjects were parents with children with ASD attending the Psychiatric Child Day Service during the period from June 2012 to January 2013. After obtaining their consent, they were asked to fill in a set of questionnaires, which included Parent Empowerment Scale (Chang & Lin, 2007), and General Self-Efficacy Scale (SES; Zhang & Schwarzer, 1995), together with Center of Epidemiological Studies - Depression scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977; Cheung & Bagley, 1998), and Parenting Stress Index – Short Form (PSI/SF; Abidin, 1995; Lam, 1999), to measure their depression and stress level respectively. Some demographic variables were also included. A total of 67 completed responses were collected for data analysis.

Result

Results Structure of parent perceived empowerment A principal component analysis

was conducted on the items of the Parent Empowerment Scale. Two factor components, namely Self-decision and Influence, were generated. Each of these two components showed high reliabilities of Cronbach's $\alpha = .940$ and $.891$ respectively. They, in combination 14 items, explained 66.64% of variance, and showed good split-half reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .812$). Besides, it also indicated significant relationship with self-efficacy, $r = .558$, $p < .001$ in SES. Relationship between parent empowerment and mental health Results supported the hypothesis that parents who perceived higher level of empowerment were significantly less depressed ($r = -.331$, $p < .001$ in CES-D) and less stressful in parenting ($r = -.362$, $p < .001$ in PSI/SF). Further investigation showed their perceived sources of stress were mainly due to their personal parental distress, and stresses derived from parent-child interaction, but they did not perceive their child as particularly more difficult to manage. Discussion This study offers local empirical data to support our belief that empowering parents may enhance their mental health, with lower depression, less parental distress, and reduced stress in parent-child interaction. Furthermore, it also contributes to our understanding of the way to empower parents. To give parents choices to make own decisions and to let them exercise their influencing power in regard to their children's treatment would be effective ways to make parents perceive higher level of empowerment, which is associated with lower depression and stress level. Clinicians should bear these practices in mind as they are clinically so beneficial for the mental health of parents we are serving.