

# Parent Social Participation and Distress in Families of Children with Developmental Disabilities

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## Background

Research consistently indicates that mothers of children with developmental disabilities (DD) experience considerable stress (Herring et al., 2006), often as a result of the behavioral problems that occur at high rates in children and adolescents with DD (Brereton, Tonge, & Einfeld, 2006). One factor that may influence the relationship between child behavior problems and family distress is social participation, which has been found to predict successful adaptation in families of children with DD (Weiss, 2002). Child age and gender are also important variables to consider when examining family distress.

## Purpose

The objective of this study was to test whether the relationship between child behavior problems and family distress is mediated by parent social participation.

## Method

- N=125 parents (90% mothers)
- 78% of parents were married/common law
- Children: 86 males, 37 females
- Mean child age = 11.72 years (Range = 7-19, SD = 3.36)
- 50% of children were noted to have an Autism Spectrum Disorder in addition to an intellectual impairment

## Measures

### Predictor Variable: Aggressive Behavior

- Mothers rated the frequency of aggressive behaviors from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*hourly*).

### Mediator: Social Participation

- Frequency of participation in social events (i.e., family outings, church attendance, vacations).
- The 7 Items were scored on a scale ranging from 1 (*Much less than other people*) to 5 (*Much more than other people*).

### Outcome Variable: Family Distress

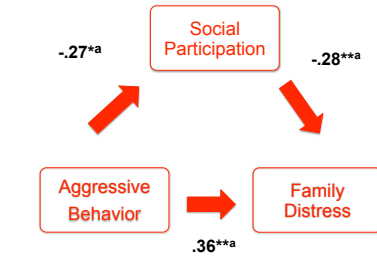
- Brief Family Distress Scale (Weiss & Lunsky, in press)
  - Asked parents to rate their degree of current crisis on a 10-point scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all in crisis*) to 10 (*We are in crisis and it could not get any worse*).
  - 54% of respondents had no impairment (1-3 on the distress scale), 36% had moderate impairment (4-5), and 10% had marked impairment (6-10).

## Results

With child age and gender controlled:

- A significant relationship was found between the predictor, aggressive behavior, and the outcome variable, family distress ( $\beta=.44, p < .001$ ).
- A relationship was also found between the mediator, social participation, and family distress ( $\beta= -.38, p < .001$ ).
- A relationship was found between aggressive behavior and social participation ( $\beta= -.27, p < .01$ ).
- The mediator reduced the strength of the relationship between aggressive behavior and family distress (from  $\beta=.44, p < .001$  to  $\beta=.36, p < .01$ ), in an overall model that accounted for 27% of the variance in family distress.
- The Sobel test confirmed that social participation was found to partially mediate the effect of aggressive behavior on family distress ( $p < .01$ ).
- Social participation explained 7.1% of the unique variance.
- Aggressive behavior explained 12.1% of the unique variance.

Figure 1.  
Partial Mediating Effect of Social Participation on the Relationship Between Aggressive Behavior and Family Distress



<sup>a</sup>Sobel result:  $z=2.87, p < .01$   
<sup>\*</sup> $p < .05$ . <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .01$ .

## Discussion

- Social participation was found to partially mediate the relationship between aggressive behavior and family distress.
- The results of this study indicate that aggressive behavior is strongly linked to family distress; however, social participation also plays an important role in family well-being by reducing the impact of aggressive behaviors on family distress.
- Analyses were correlational and cross-sectional, and the study relied on self-reports.
- Future research could investigate interventions aimed at increasing social participation in families of children with developmental disabilities.

**Acknowledgments:** Data for this study were collected as part of the CIHR Team: GO4KIDDS: Great Outcomes for Kids Impacted by Severe Developmental Disabilities, Nominated Principal Investigator: Adrienne Perry, York University. ([www.go4kidds.ca](http://www.go4kidds.ca)) GO4KIDDS is an ongoing research project examining the health, well-being and social inclusion of children with severe DD. The current study used data collected from a GO4KIDDS basic survey completed by parents of children with severe DD from across Canada through an online survey system.

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