Child behaviour problems and mothers’ mental health: What is the evidence in the UK population?

Numerous studies have suggested that children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) have very high levels of behaviour problems. Similarly, many studies have suggested their mothers are at increased risk for mental health problems. Quite a few studies actually find that the two are related: mothers’ psychological well-being is inter-linked to the child’s behaviour problems.

But is it always the case that children with ASD have high levels of behaviour problems? And that their mothers are more stressed? We questioned this, as most of the studies seem to include small numbers of people identified through services. Some people who raise a child with ASD are not associated with statutory or voluntary services, either by personal choice or not. These people do not usually have the chance to take part in research, and say what it’s like for them.

So, how can we ensure that research includes everyone’s experiences? One way is to look at national surveys. They include many thousands of people selected from the entire British population. Among those, we can identify individuals with ASD, which provides a unique opportunity to explore some questions from families across the board. We looked at two national surveys. The first included more than 18,000 5 to 16 year-old children 1, 2, while the second included about 15,000 5-year-olds 3, 4.

Children’s behaviour problems: Are they high?

Yes, it seems to be the case. High levels of hyperactivity and conduct problems are present in about 85% of children with ASD, whether they have an associated learning disability or not2. On average, these problems emerge early: by age 5, 87% of children with ASD and a learning disability have very high levels of hyperactivity compared to children with only ASD, or only a learning disability, or none of these conditions (Figure 1). By age 5, between 46% and 58% of children with ASD (with or without a learning disability) also have high levels of conduct problems.

Mothers’ well-being

We focused on two aspects of well-being: positive and negative. Negative includes psychological distress and the risk of being diagnosed with psychiatric disorders. Positive well-being included positive mental health and life satisfaction. Positive mental health describes things like mothers’ feelings of happiness and enjoyment of normal activities.

So, overall, mothers tend to be at risk of negative outcomes. Across the childhood years (5 to 16 years), about 44% of mothers of children with an ASD were likely to have an emotional disorder2. But this ASD ‘disadvantage’, does not start early in the parent-child relationship. Mothers of 5-year-old children with an ASD are no more likely to have a psychiatric disorder (about 5% of them) than other mothers (Figure 2). They tend to experience slightly more psychological distress when their child has both ASD and a learning disability. Overall, these findings do not suggest a consistent disadvantage of raising a young child with an ASD, but perhaps an emerging disadvantage of raising a child with a disability.
What about positive well-being?

Interestingly, there seem to be no differences in positive well-being between mothers of children with ASD and other mothers. Across the childhood years (5 to 16 years), between 17% and 23% of mothers of children with an ASD (with or without a learning disability) had high levels of positive mental health. At age 5, about 33% of mums with a child with an ASD and 15% of mums of children with both ASD/learning disability reported being very satisfied with their life (Figure 2). In no case were they any different to other groups of mothers.

And are these related?

As with other studies, we found that mothers’ well-being is related to their children’s behaviour problems. We wanted, however, to also look at long-term effects. So, looking at children with an ASD in the early years of development (9 months to 5 years), their behaviour problems seem to have no adverse effect on mothers’ well-being two years later. On the other hand, mothers’ psychological distress and life satisfaction do seem to affect children’s behaviour two years later.

Implications for practice

Information from families representing the entire UK population indicates that children with ASD have very high levels of behaviour problems, and also that these problems are present early in the child’s life. These findings emphasise the need for early intervention targeting children’s behaviour problems.

In terms of mothers’ mental health, we have seen that there is an increased risk for mental health problems across childhood, but it doesn’t seem to be present from the early years. More importantly, positive well-being seems to be intact in these mothers. Maternal well-being is related to children’s behaviour problems. And when we focus on positive well-being, it is clear that this can be associated with reductions in child behaviour problems. Another route to early intervention would be to decrease psychological distress in mothers and increase their life satisfaction. This would not only boost improvements in children’s behaviour problems, but would also increase families’ resilience in the long run.

Note

We would like to thank the ESRC who supported this work with a grant. We hope you found this article interesting. For any queries, please email: v.totsika@bangor.ac.uk

References

3 Millennium Cohort Study:
http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/page.aspx?&sitesectionid=851&sitesectiontitle=Welcome+to+the+Millennium+Cohort+Study

Copyright: When reproducing this document, you must fully acknowledge the author of the document as shown at the top of the page. Please see Network Autism Terms & Conditions for details.