



Resource Article

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Engaging
Children with ASD
in Daily Routines

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This month's resource article explores the course of daily living skills in children with ASD as well as the role that daily living skills play in parenting stress. Daily living skills encompass "...age-appropriate self-care activities needed to function at home and in the community..." and "...include behaviors such as washing, dressing, following safety rules, and completing household chores" (Green & Carter, 2014). While daily living skills have been extensively studied in older children with ASD, the development of daily living skills in young children has yet to be explored. Green and Carter (2014) conducted a study to "examine the development of daily living skills across 3 years in young children with ASD." Green and Carter (2014) investigated the following questions:

- What is the trajectory of daily living skills across early childhood in children with ASD?

- Do age, developmental level, autism symptom severity, and problem behavior predict daily living skills levels and trajectories?
- Do daily living skills predict variance in parenting stress?

The study included 161 toddlers and their families who participated in two visits each year, including a child visit, parent interview, and completion of a questionnaire. The study concluded "...children with ASD gain in daily living skills over time, but do so at a slower rate than typically developing children" (Green & Carter, 2014). This indicates that the gap between daily living skills in children with ASD and typically developing children increases across early childhood. While a higher developmental level was consistent with rapid gains in daily living skills, IQ level was not a factor. This indicates that even children with higher functioning autism and normal IQs can still have

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deficits in daily living skills. The study also explored the role of problem behaviors in daily living skills and noted that "...results indicate that while children with high behavior problems are behind in daily living skills, they do not appear to gain skills at a slower rate than children with fewer behavior problems" (Green & Carter, 2014). Green and Carter (2014) concluded that "[b]aseline levels of children's age, IQ, autism symptom severity, [and] child problem behaviors..." did not predict a change in parenting stress. However, gains in daily living skills did predict decreased stress in parents over time.

While daily living skills are the focus of intervention for older children with ASD it is rarely intertwined with the interventions for younger children. Daily living skill deficits are common in children with ASD, yet when the children are younger the focus tends to be on "...language acquisition and/or social communication deficits" and problem behaviors (Green & Carter, 2014). Caregivers often report that it is simpler for them to perform these daily living tasks for their young child rather than teach them. However, this study reinforced that by "teaching and

requiring children to perform simple adaptive skills such as eating with a spoon or toilet training may reduce parenting stress" (Green & Carter, 2014). This would in turn promote children's natural learning opportunities and facilitate caregivers time to also work toward advancing other functional skills their child needs to participate in day to day activities, including social interactions, acquiring and using knowledge and skills, and taking appropriate action to meet their needs. Green and Carter (2014) state "...reducing parenting stress may be essential to helping parents facilitate their children's development."

In light of this research, we can see how important it is to include a focus on promoting daily living skills in young children rather than preserving this focus for older children with ASD. It is also important to recognize the impact that delays in adaptive skills can have on the entire family and the progress that can be made when the child improves their daily living skills to more actively participate in daily activities.

Green, S., & Carter, A. (2014). Predictors and course of daily living skills development in toddlers with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 44(2), 256-63. doi:10.1007/s10803-011-1275-0

What do the data say?



Raising a child with ASD is both rewarding and challenging. To explore the challenges, Sim, Vaz, Cordier, Joosten, Parsons, Smith, and Falkmer (2018) examined factors associated with family stress in raising a child with ASD. A caregiver-report questionnaire was mailed to 3,723 families with one or more children with ASD. Nearly 550 (543) questionnaires were returned. The researchers then telephoned a random sample of families, who did not complete the original questionnaire, and asked them to complete an abbreviated phone questionnaire. Through this process additional data from 146 families on 171 children were collected. The majority of respondents, 55.6%, reported experiencing low stress, while 44.4% reporting severe stress. The following four variables were identified as contributors to severe family stress as perceived by caregivers.

Reduced ability of caregivers to socialize

Sim et al. (2018) stated, “[c]aregivers who reported a high impact (severe, very severe, and worst possible impact) on their ability to socialize were 10 times more likely to report severe stress...” It is common for caregivers to report social isolation secondary to their child with ASDs functioning and behaviors. A negative community attitude toward children with ASD makes it difficult for caregivers to engage in community activities. Lack of suitable childcare for children with ASD compounds this challenge. Sim et al. (2018) explain that “[t]his finding highlights the importance of collaborating with families to identify meaningful social activities and ways to overcome barriers to social participation as part of a comprehensive approach to managing stress”.

Caregivers not accessing individualized counseling

Caregivers who did not access therapy/counseling services for themselves “...were seven times more likely to report severe family stress...” (Sim et al., 2018). Individual counseling for caregivers can be an integral part of managing the familial stress that accompanies raising a child with ASD. Individual counseling helps caregivers cope with the challenges, enables them to tell their story, provides emotional validation, assists them in identifying their strengths, and helps them set goals (Sim et al., 2018).

Impact of ASD diagnosis on the co-parent relationship

Sim et al. (2018) explained that “[c]aregivers who reported a negative impact of ASD on their relationship with their partner/co-parent were seven times more likely to be severely stressed...” Co-parents are often the most important source of informal support for caregivers (Sim et al., 2018). It is also worth noting, “[l]ack of support from a co-parent is associated with greater internalizing, externalizing, and antisocial behavior in children” (Sim et al., 2018). On the other hand, a healthy co-parent alliance can stabilize families in times of stress, facilitate positive child adjustment, and reduce overall stress levels. Strengthening the co-parent relationship would enable a protective factor for the entire family (Sim et al., 2018).

Annual cost associated with raising a child with ASD

Families who incurred high ASD related costs were eight times more likely to be severely stressed and families who incurred mid-range costs were six times more likely to be severely stressed (Sim et al., 2018). It is not uncommon for families to access up to seven forms of treatment concurrently, in fact, “...between 62% and 95% of families access complementary and alternative therapies” (Sim et al., 2018). Sim et al. (2018) noted “...the greatest cost to families appears to be lost income, which has been found to constitute 90% of annual ASD-related costs”. Oftentimes when a child is diagnosed with ASD one parent leaves their employment to care for their child, while the other parent increases hours to offset the loss of income. “Mothers have expressed dissatisfaction and resentment over the sacrifices made to their careers which have led to feelings of isolation, lack of fulfillment, and low self-esteem” (Sim et al., 2018). A multifaceted approach is needed in managing finance-related stress.

Sim et al. (2018) stated “[w]e found that raising a child with ASD can influence family stress through various layers of the family system and therefore recommend family systems theories as the scaffolding for future research, policy development, and service provision.” While the majority of families reported low stress levels related to raising a child with ASD there is still an abundance of factors that attribute to severe stress in these families.



Consultation Corner

ASD and Play

Play helps children develop motor skills, language and communication skills, problem-solving skills, and social skills. However, because many young children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have deficits or delays in their social-communication skills their playful interaction with parents, siblings, and peers might be impacted. Many children with ASD have very limited play skills and social interaction, play with only a few specific toys, or play in a repetitive way. In addition, children with ASD tend to play alone or alongside others.

To increase playful interaction, families and professionals can use different strategies and arrange the physical and social environment to support play and communication. It is recommended to collaborate with the child's team (e.g., speech therapist, developmental therapist, other professionals) to develop a plan that could be used in different contexts and with different play partners. In addition, adults should use children's favorite items and activities that are new and exciting to children to successfully increase playful interaction.

One naturalistic strategy that could promote play is environmental arrangement. Environmental arrangement practices include a variety of strategies to set up the physical, social, and temporal environments to increase communication and play among children and adults. *Physical environment practices* include organizing the environment (e.g., space, and materials) in the home and childcare to increase motivation for communication and play. *Social environment practices* include arranging the people in the environment (e.g., parents, peers, and siblings) to promote social interaction and provide opportunities for social engagement, play and communication among children and adults. *Temporal environment practices* include following routines and activities that are familiar to the children and promote initiations and social interaction.

Meadan and Angell (2016) described three different easy ways to arrange the environment to encourage children to communicate and engage in social interaction- *pick, present, play*.

PICK- the first strategy is to *pick* toys, activities, or materials that the child is interested in and give the child a reason to communicate and interact. Picking favorite or interesting items and activities will enhance the child's motivation to interact, which is the first step in starting a social interaction.

PRESENT- the second strategy is to *present* the toys, activities, or materials in a way that increases the probability that the child will communicate and interact.

PLAY- Finally, the adults, siblings, or peers can also *play* with an item or activity the child likes in a way that will require the child to communicate.

Parents and teachers can use all the strategies together or just one at a time. For example, a parent can give her child one piece of her favorite puzzle (pick/physical environment), split the puzzle pieces between the child and his sibling (present/social environment), and ask them to take turns in completing the whole puzzle (play/temporal environment). The Pick, Present, Play strategies are easy to use and can promote motivation for social interaction and play. These can lead to an ongoing communication and interaction that will set children up to successfully respond, initiate, communicate, and play more often with others. As always, it is important to reinforce social interaction and play and celebrate small and big achievements.

Meadan, H. & Angell, M. E. (2016). Pick, present, play: Promoting young children's communication. In Catalino, T., & Meyer, L. E. (Eds.). *Environment: Promoting meaningful access, participation, and inclusion (DEC Recommended Practices Monograph Series No. 2)*. Washington, DC: Division for Early Childhood. (pp. 127-136).



On the WWW

Did you know The Hanen Centre provides useful information on how to help parents learn to effectively play with their child? The web resource this month is Play & Autism: More evidence for following the child's lead. The article, written by Lauren Lowry, examines the data surrounding how parents typically play with their child as well as useful tips on how to effectively engage their child during play. It encourages techniques such as, following the child's lead, playing within their child's

zone of proximal development and the power of imitation. This article also promotes choosing toys that encourage interactive play. This article is sure to be a great asset to understanding effective play. You can read this article in its entirety at:

<https://www.hanen.org/MyHanen/Resource-Centre/Articles/Research/Play---Autism--More-evidence-for-following-the-chi.aspx>



Continuing Education for KIT Readers

The Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) is offering a continuing education opportunity for KIT readers.

Upon successful completion of the exam, you will receive a certificate of non-discipline specific continuing education contact hours.

In line with the focus on **Engaging Children with ASD in Daily Routines** readers are invited to receive continuing education contact hours for reading the monthly KIT publications (December 2019 - February 2020) and completing a multiple-choice exam about the content covered in these KITs.

KIT readers will receive the exam for this series in February 2020. There is no need to register for the CEUs. Rather, if you are interested, complete the exam online at www.edis.army.mil

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Thank you for your continued interest in the KIT.

