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Specifics of Parent-Child Relationships in Families Raising Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract

Family is the first social institution where the education and upbringing of the person takes place. It acts as an important factor in influencing the child, determines the dynamics of the child's development and contributes to successful social adaptation and integration in society. The birth of a child with disabilities in the family may create the crisis situation when all family members go through certain stages, from the growth of tension to the mobilization of external and internal resources.

This empirical research showed that parents raising children with mild ASD have positive attitudes towards the child and the desire to be with the child on an equal footing against the background of excessive care and control. Children in such families tend to lack independence. This type of upbringing, called "dominant hyperprotection" leads to the formation of the fear of losing the child. This unstable style of upbringing makes it difficult for the child to integrate and adapt in the society. Another group of parents raising children with atypical autism or ASD and associated organic disorders is characterized by a violation of the upbringing process in the form of "conniving hyperprotection". The study outlines recommendations for families raising children with ASD, aimed at harmonizing parent-child relationships, overcoming negative attitudes, successful integration and adaptation of children in the society.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, family, adaptation, integration.

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Introduction

The birth of a child with a mental health disorder is a major challenge for any family which causes prolonged stress. On a daily basis, the family has to deal with the challenges related to the organization of the life of the child. They are forced to seek special methods of communication and education, to cope with social constraints, stereotypes, and the lack of understanding from others. Such difficulties require each family member to change their usual perception of the world and reconsider the prospects for the future life in a fairly short period of time (Nikolskaya, Baenskaya, & Liebling, 2012). Extant research also shows that positive developmental dynamics, successful socialization, and integration of children with autism depend largely on parental attitudes and their emotional acceptance, realistic assessment, and an adequate style of family education (Dehghani, 2016; Eidemiller, 2009; O'Neill, 1999; Park & Yourderian, 1974). According to Varga & Drabkina (2011), the child-parent relationship is a system of various feelings towards the child, behavioural patterns practiced in communication with the child, peculiarities of perception and understanding of the character, personality and actions of the child. In case of the birth of a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), parents try to protect their families from hostile displays, creating both physical and psychological protection. This results in isolation of the family, which, in its turn, prevents the development of communication and social skills of children with ASD.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The research sets to identify the characteristics of child-parent relationships in families raising children with ASD. Research objectives are 1) to identify the characteristics of child-parent relationships in families raising children with ASD, parental attitudes, and types of pathological family upbringing; 2) to identify existing correlations between psychological peculiarities of parent-child relationships and types of upbringing depending on different types of ASD.

Literature review

When analysing parental attitudes towards children with ASD, it is important to consider the degree of interaction between an autistic child and other members of the family as well as the influence of the child-parent and marital relations on the dynamics of the child's development and social adaptation as with an apparent emotional detachment, such children are extremely susceptible to the state of a significant adult (Karvasarskaya, 2003).

In modern Russian and foreign studies, much attention is paid to parents' attitudes to the birth of a special child in the family: what they overcome, how they experience misunderstanding and even rejection by the society (Eidemiller, 2009; Kagan, 1981; Levchenko, 2008; Mamaichuk, 2007; Mastjukova, 2003). There are studies focusing on the peculiarities of interfamilial relationships (Klein, 2002; Karvasarskaya, 2003; Powell, 2000) peculiarities of parental attitudes (Zinkevich-Evstigneeva, 2010), especially that of mothers (Pechnikova, 1997; Williams, 2003), and styles of family education of children with ASD (Levchenko, 2008; Mamaichuk, 2007). The majority of research is devoted to the mother-child dyad relationship. There are also studies considering the problems and possibilities of including children with ASD in the general educational space (Chulkov, 2011).

Several researchers studied the characteristics of families raising children with ASD and found that parents of children with ASD are more vulnerable than parents of children with other diagnoses (Zinkevich-Evstigneeva, 2010; Pechnikova, 1997). The researchers analysed parents' attitudes to the child in several ways: the real interaction of the parent with the child; the parent's attitude towards the child; the parent's attitude to the child, subject to the influence of the parent's unconscious motivation (Varga & Drabkina, 2011). Ferrari (2004) looked into such psychological features as a sense of hopelessness and parental failure, uncertainty in the style of education, which is aggravated by the lack of awareness of adults about the problem of autism and unwillingness of the society to accept an autistic child. Initially, parents react differently to the news of violations in the child. While fathers tend to react less emotionally and ask questions about the consequences of violations, mothers show a more emotional reaction and express fear of not being able to cope with the care of the child. Fathers are more concerned about their children's socially acceptable behaviour, social status, and a career than mothers (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004). Studying the problems of child-parent relations in families raising a child with ASD, we examined a specific "confusion syndrome" which manifests itself in a high level of anxiety, mothers and fathers' emotional instability (Pechnikova, 1997). However, Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda (2004) emphasized that not only mothers but also fathers of children with ASD suffer from family isolation and need qualified help from specialists.

Methodology

The research of psychological features of the child-parent relationships in families raising a child with ASD took place in the Kirov Regional Clinical Psychiatric Hospital named after Academician V.M. Bekhterev. The parents of 26 children diagnosed with ASD gave their consent to participate in the research. The respondents' age ranged from 32 to 45 years (the average age – 36.5 years). The participants were divided into three groups according to the child's diagnosis.

Group 1 consisted of parents raising a child with early childhood autism. Group 2 consisted of parents of children with ASD with an organic background. Group 3 consisted of parents of children with atypical autism.

The questionnaire of parental attitude (Varga, 1988), PARI method, the questionnaire of parental attitudes by Schaefer and Bell (Ostroukhova, 2014), the questionnaire “Analysis of family relations” (Eidemiller, 2009) were employed. Data was analysed using the methods of mathematical statistics, namely calculation of percentage distribution of results, calculation of mean value and standard deviation, Mann-Whitney U-test, Spearman's rank- order correlation coefficient.

Results

The results of the experimental study, using the Mann-Whitney U-test and the Spearman's rank-order correlation, have been used to determine the statistical significance of the results and to identify strong correlations between the scales of the techniques.

The results showed that most parents learned about their children's diagnosis of ASD at the age between 2.6 and 4 years. The average age of the children is 5.5 years. The results of peculiarities of parental attitudes towards children with ASD based on the Parental Attitude Questionnaire (Varga, 1988) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The severity of the scales by levels (%).

Levels Scales	High			Medium			Low		
	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Acceptance-rejection	70	56	42	30	33	58	0	11	0
Cooperation	50	22	28	50	45	44	0	33	28
Symbiosis	30	33	28	40	56	42	30	11	30
Control	80	78	85	20	22	15	0	0	0
Attitude towards the child's failures	40	56	56	30	22	30	30	22	14

The attitude of parents to their child was studied on five scales: acceptance-rejection of the child (expresses a general emotionally positive or emotionally negative attitude towards the child); cooperation (reflects the desire of adults to cooperate with the child, the manifestation of sincere interest on their part and participation in his affairs); symbiosis (expresses the desire of adults to unite with the child);

authoritarian hypersocialization (characterizes how adults control the child's behavior, how democratic or authoritarian they are in relations with him); little loser (reflects the attitude of adults to the child's abilities, to his success and failures).

It was revealed that the respondents in Group 1 (parents of children with early childhood autism without concomitant organic pathology) had high scores predominantly on the "Acceptance-rejection" and "Control" scales. The respondents in Group 2 (parents of children with ASD with organic pathology and concomitant disorders) displayed high scores on the "Control" scale as did the respondents in Group 3 (parents of children with atypical autism). The Mann-Whitney U-test revealed a significant difference between the groups of respondent only on the "Cooperation" scale ($p \leq 0.05$).

This way, positive attitudes towards the child, acceptance and respect for individuality, and encouragement of autonomy and initiative characterize parents raising children with mild ASD. It should be noted that the respondents in all groups displayed care and interest in the child's needs, an adequate attitude towards the child's abilities, achievements and failures, as evidenced by the average and high results on the scales of "Control" and "Attitude towards child's failures".

The study of parents' attitudes in the field of interpersonal relations and perceptions of different genders in the family life, revealing the specificity of interfamilial relations has been identified by the PARI method (Parental Attitude Research Instrument) developed by Schaefer E.S. and Bell R.K. (Ostroukhova, 2014). The respondents were divided into two groups (mothers and fathers). The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The results of the study of the parents' attitudes to the family role (%).

Scales	Levels	High		Low	
		Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
Dependence on the family		40	15	25	60
Feeling of self-sacrifice		65	50	0	15
Family conflicts		35	30	65	70
Parental overconfidence		55	45	10	15
Dissatisfaction with the role of mistress of the house		20	45	25	15
The husband's "indifference", his lack of involvement in the affairs of the family		35	0	20	55
Domination of the mother		20	35	15	15
Mother's helplessness		45	55	10	15

The data indicate the prevalence of high scores for mothers raising the children with ASD on the scales: "Feeling of self-sacrifice" (65%), "Parental overconfidence" (55%), while fathers scored high on the scales: "Feeling of self-sacrifice" (50%), "Mother's helplessness" (45%).

It is worth noting that more than half of the respondents had low scores on the "Family conflicts" scale (65% of mothers and 70% of fathers denied the existence of family conflicts).

The application of the criterion of Mann-Whitney U-test revealed significant differences in the assessment of aspects of family role of fathers and mothers on the scales "Feeling of Self-Sacrifice" ($p \leq 0.01$), "Dependence on Family", "Parental Superauthority" ($p \leq 0.05$). The results revealed that the priority is given to the development of family relationships and solving family problems over self-development. The high scores on the "Feeling of Self-Sacrifice" scale also indicated emotional dissatisfaction with the family role.

The research according to the PARI method was continued to determine the characteristics of the emotional contact of the parents with their children. The data on the aspect of "optimal emotional contact with the child" are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The results of the study of manifestations of emotional contact by the PARI method (%).

Scales	Levels	High		Low	
		Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
Verbalization		60	65	0	10
Partners' relationship		25	35	30	15
Child activity development		65	45	0	10
Equality between parents and the child		20	45	35	15

The data on the percentage of results obtained in the "optimal emotional contact with the child" dimension revealed that both mothers and fathers raising children with ASD have high scores on the "Verbalization" scale (60 and 65%), as well as on the "Child activity development" scale (65 and 45%). The results on the "Partners' relationship" and "Equality between parents and the child" scales revealed that fathers of children with ASD demonstrate greater flexibility in their relationship with the child and role allocation and are focused on developing a partnership relationship with the child.

Determination of the features of emotional distance in the attitude of parents to a child with ASD was measured using the PARI method.

Table 4. The results of the study on the emotional distance of parents to the child according to the PARI method

Scales	Levels	High		Low	
		Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
Irritability		45	40	0	0
Severity, excessive severity		20	25	10	15
Avoidance of contact with the child		30	45	20	10

The obtained data revealed that the parents of children with ASD predominantly scored high on the "Irritability" scale. At the same time, both mothers and fathers of children with ASD did not show excessive stringency in raising their children (20% of mothers and 25% of fathers showed high scores on this scale). It is also worth noting that fathers had higher scores on the "Avoidance of contact with the child" scale. The mothers raising children with ASD are more likely to show irritability ($p \leq 0.05$), impulsivity in relations with the child, while avoiding direct conflict, indicating signs of emotional instability.

The characteristics of the parents' emotional attitude to a child with ASD according to the PARI method, which examines excessive concentration on the child, is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. The results of the study of excessive concentration on the child according to the PARI method (%).

Scales	Levels	High		Low	
		Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
Excessive care, establishing a dependent relationship		65	45	0	10
Overcoming resistance, suppressing the will		40	25	20	20
Creating safety, fear of hurting		70	55	0	0
Exclusion of out-of-family influences		15	15	45	50
Suppression of aggression		40	25	0	0
Suppression of sexuality		15	10	35	20
Excessive interference in the world of the child		45	15	0	10
Striving to accelerate child development		25	40	30	25

The identification of the characteristics of parents' emotional attitudes towards their children with ASD using the PARI method, that is developed to examine the excessive concentration on the child, showed that the parents of children with ASD scored high on the scales "Excessive care, establishing a dependent relationship", "Creating safety, fear of hurting", while mothers also had high scores on the "Suppression of aggression" and "Excessive interference in the world of the child" scales. The fathers of children with ASD showed higher scores on the "Striving to accelerate child development" scale. The high scores reflect the parents' fear of the unpredictable reaction of the child with disorders during social interactions and uncertainty in their educational abilities, which is also reflected in the desire for constant control over the child.

The questionnaire "Analysis of family relationships" developed by Eidemiller E.G. and Yustitskis V.V. (Eidemiller, 2009) was also used to study the parent-child relations in families bringing up children with

ASD. The results showed that the respondents in all groups had predominantly high scores on the "Hyperprotection" and "Indulgence" scales. Existing differences indicated that the respondents from Group 1 had low scores on the "Insufficient requirements-prohibitions" and "Excessive sanctions" scales. Compared to Group 1, the respondents in Group 2 and Group 3 scored high on the same scales. That indicates that parents of children with early infantile autism are more likely to use encouragement and strive for democratic communication with their children.

The differences were also found for the respondents in Group 1 with low scores on the "Unstable Parenting Style" scale (parents of children with early infantile autism demonstrate a more even and stable parenting style). Compared to Group 1, the respondents in Group 2 and Group 3 had high scores on this scale.

In addition, the respondents in all groups had high scores on the scales "Preference for childlike qualities" and "Phobia of child loss". It is important to note the predominance of high scores for respondents in Group 2 and Group 3 on the "Lack of Parental Feelings" scale which is due to the significant constraints faced by families of children with severe forms of ASD. Also, the respondents in Group 2 had high scores on the "Parenting Uncertainty" scale.

Discussion

The combination of high scores on the scales in Group 1 revealed the "Dominant hyperprotection" type of parenting which is characterized by excessive tutelage and control and the lack of children's autonomy. This type of upbringing may lead to the fear of losing the child, emotional instability, the parents' educational insecurity (as proved by the high results on the additional scales).

The results of the respondents in Group 2 are characterized by overestimation on the scales "Indulgence", "Insufficient demands-duties", "Insufficient sanctions", "Unstable parenting style", "Nurturing insecurity", "Preference for child-like qualities" and "Insufficient parental feelings". The type of parenting in the case of parents raising a child with ASD and organic disorders is characterized by fear and reluctance to grow up, encouragement of the child's impulsivity, lack of responsibility, and a low level of demands. Ignoring age-related changes in the child is due to the fear of an unpredictable developmental prognosis in the case of multiple mental health disorders.

The research also revealed that the participants in Group 3 had the "Indulgent Hyperprotection" type of parenting which is characterized by the family's entire focus on meeting the needs of a child, exaggerating the actual abilities of a child. In combination with the high scores on the other scales, this type of parenting masks the educational insecurity of parents, underdeveloped parental feelings towards the child, and strong motive of obligation to upbringing.

The empirical research revealed that parents raising children with mild ASD tend to have a positive attitude towards the child and strive to be on an equal footing with the child against the background of excessive tutelage and control, and the lack of the child's independence. The type of upbringing called "dominant hyperprotection" leads to the formation of fear of loss of the child, unstable style of upbringing, which makes integration and adaptation of the child in the society difficult. Another group of parents raising children with atypical autism or ASD and associated organic disorders is characterized by the disruption of the upbringing process in the form of "conniving hyperprotection". This type of parenting creates difficulties in establishing an optimal emotional distance between the parent and the child due to parental insecurity, underdeveloped parental feelings towards the child and the predominance of the duty motive in parenting. Thus, the successful integration and adaptation of children with ASD in the society is largely dependent on parental attitudes, emotional acceptance, realistic assessment and an appropriate style of family upbringing.

Conclusion

The conducted empirical research of psychological features of the parent-child relationships in families raising a child with ASD leads to the conclusion that in the case of mild ASD, parents tend to adopt the "dominant hyperprotection" type of parenting which is manifested in excessive tutelage and control, lack of the child's independence and leads to the formation of fear of child loss, unstable parenting style. The comparison of these results with other types of ASD showed that parents raising a child with atypical autism or ASD and concomitant organic disorders showed impaired parenting in the form of "pandering hyperprotection", difficulties in establishing emotional distance amidst educational insecurity, underdeveloped parental feelings towards the child and a predominant motive of obligation in parenting.

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Competing interests

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