



Spilling over: Partner parenting stress as a predictor of family cohesion in parents of adolescents with developmental disabilities



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ABSTRACT

Family cohesion relates to positive outcomes for both parents and children. Maintaining cohesion may be especially challenging for families of adolescents with developmental disabilities, yet this has been studied infrequently in this group. We investigated cohesion in these families, particularly with respect to partner stress, using the notion of the 'spillover effect' as a model.

Adolescents with disabilities and their parents participated. Parents reported on teen adaptive and problem behaviours and on marital satisfaction, parenting stress, and family cohesion. The stress of one partner was tested as a predictor of the quality of family cohesion reported by the other.

Adolescent behaviour problems were negative predictors of family cohesion in mothers, and marital satisfaction positively predicted cohesion for both parents. Above other factors, greater partner stress predicted poorer family cohesion for both fathers and mothers. Marital satisfaction acted as a suppressor of this relation. To improve the overall climate of families, care providers should take into consideration individual relationships, including the marital relationship. In addition, the possibility of spillover from one individual to another should be recognized as a factor in family functioning. Family-centred practices are likely to lead to greater feelings of cohesion and overall better individual and family well-being.

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What this paper adds?

Family cohesion and marital satisfaction are important factors in the lives of family members, but little research has investigated these constructs in relation to families in which an adolescent has a developmental disability. Similarly, the 'spillover effect', or the transfer of emotion or stress from one partner to another, has been studied with respect to families of typically developing children but not with regard to families in which a child or teen has a disability. This study adds to the literature on parental stress, marital satisfaction, and family cohesion and includes the perspective of families of adolescents with disabilities. Finally, it adds the notion of the 'spillover effect' and the importance of the marital relationship to our understandings of the functioning of families of adolescents with developmental disabilities.

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1. Introduction

From the perspective of family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1985), the functioning of the family contributes uniquely to the children and adults in the family, over and above the effects of individual traits or dyadic interactions. Understanding the well-being of individuals thus necessitates understanding the family as a whole. With this in mind, researchers are increasingly investigating the perspectives of multiple family members and looking to measures of overall family functioning as keys to understanding the lives of children and families.

Awareness of the importance of the functioning of the family as a unit has led to the study of family cohesion, which can be conceptualized as the level of connectedness and emotional support experienced within a family (Olson, 1986). Higher levels of family cohesion have been found to relate to less parental stress as well as to greater adaptive behaviour and social functioning in children. These relations have been reported in families of typically developing children (Brophy-Herb et al., 2013; Farrell & Barnes, 1993; Shigeto, Mangelsdorf, & Brown, 2013) as well as in families in which a child has a disability (Margalit & Kleitman, 2006; Mink, Nihira, & Meyers, 1983; Mitchell & Hauser-Cram, 2009).

Although the bulk of research on family cohesion has focused on young children, some studies have considered this aspect of the family system with respect to older children and adolescents. In families where children are developing typically, higher family cohesion has been shown to predict greater social competence during middle childhood (Leidy, Guerra, & Toro, 2010) and less aggressive behaviour in adolescence (Barber & Buehler, 1996; Farrell & Barnes, 1993; Hamama & Arazi, 2012). Some studies have focused on families of older children with disabilities, and these investigations also indicate the importance of this construct as an indicator of healthy family functioning (McConnell, Savage, Sobsey, & Uditsky, 2015). Few investigations have considered the construct of family cohesion in relation to parenting an adolescent with disabilities. In an early study on this topic, Morrison and Zetlin (1988) reported that parents of adolescents with disabilities reported lower levels of family cohesion than parents of typically developing children, but the authors also found that within families where an adolescent had a disability, higher levels of cohesion were related to more open communication between parents and their adolescent. A more recent study that included adolescents with Fragile X syndrome and their families found that mothers who reported more cohesive family environments also reported experiencing less stress (Johnston et al., 2003).

Maintaining positive family processes such as cohesiveness may be especially challenging for families of children with disabilities, as the child often places demands on the family that are different from or greater than those of typically developing children. Parents of children with disabilities have been reported to experience greater stress than other parents (Baker et al., 2003; Hassall, Rose, & McDonald, 2005; Hodapp, 2002; Johnston et al., 2003; Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012). Such stress has been found to relate empirically to the higher levels of behaviour problems frequently exhibited by children with disabilities rather than to children's levels of intellectual or developmental skills (Baker, Blacher, & Olsson, 2005; Emerson & Einfeld, 2010; Woodman, Mawdsley, & Hauser-Cram, 2015). Higher levels of stress, in turn, have been found to relate to lower levels of cohesion in these families (Johnston et al., 2003; Margalit & Kleitman, 2006; Warfield, Krauss, Hauser-Cram, Upshur, & Shonkoff, 1999).

In relation to the aetiology of a child's disability, Lanfranchi and Vianello (2012) examined whether family cohesion varied for families of children with three specific genetic aetiologies: Down syndrome, Williams syndrome, and Prader-Willi syndrome. They reported no differences in the overall levels of cohesion reported by mothers and fathers of children with these three syndromes. However, in analyses of the relation between family cohesion and aspects of family stress, such as family problems, they found that higher levels of cohesion related to less stress for fathers of children with Down syndrome and for mothers of children with Williams syndrome. These findings suggest that parenting stress and family cohesion are often, but not consistently, negatively related, and that these relations may differ for mothers and fathers.

Many facets of the family contribute to cohesion, characteristics of the child being only one. Several decades ago, Emery, Hetherington, and DiLalla (1984) proposed that the emotional well-being of one partner in a family relationship can affect that of another, a concept they termed the "spillover effect". More generally, spillover is considered to be the transfer of emotion or stress from one person to another (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989). The negative emotions of one partner thus have the likelihood of negatively affecting the other partner and their relationship, ultimately leading to problems in the overall functioning of the family (Grych, 2002; Stroud, Durbin, Wilson, & Mendelsohn, 2011). Although many researchers have investigated spillover emotion in families, this construct has rarely been studied in parents of children with disabilities.

Research on families of children with disabilities has shown that the positive quality of the marital relationship predicts lower parenting stress in both mothers and fathers (Benson & Kersh, 2011; Kersh, Hedvat, Hauser-Cram, & Warfield, 2006). Studies also indicate that the well-being of one parent often affects the psychological stress experienced by the other parent (Gerstein, Crnic, Blacher, & Baker, 2009; Hastings et al., 2005), suggesting spillover effects in relation to stress. Although not previously investigated, such spillover effects are likely to affect perceptions of the cohesive functioning of the family system.

Mothers and fathers of children with disabilities often are found to differ from one another in their perceptions of family life. Some studies have found mothers to be more stressed than fathers by having a child with a developmental disability (Dabrowska & Pisula, 2010; Oelofsen & Richardson, 2006; Shin et al., 2006), although others have not

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