



## Adults and children with Asperger syndrome: Exploring adult attachment style, marital satisfaction and satisfaction with parenthood

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### ABSTRACT

Asperger syndrome (AS) is a disorder resembling autism in its problems with social interaction and cognitive flexibility. Today, a number of adults with AS marry and rear children. Yet there has been little research into the quality of their marital and parental relationships. This study explored romantic attachment style, marital satisfaction and parenthood satisfaction in 157 Australian men and women. There was a focal group 22 married adults with a clinically-confirmed AS diagnosis whose child also had AS and three neuro-typical adult control groups: (a) those whose spouse and child had AS, (b) those whose child had AS but spouse did not, and (c) those with no AS family members. Marital satisfaction was high in all four groups. Respondents who had AS themselves were predominantly insecurely avoidant in romantic attachment, in contrast to predominantly securely attachment in all other groups. Having a child with AS reduced parental (though not marital) satisfaction but there was no additional independent contribution of own or spouse's AS. Methodological and practical implications of the findings were considered.

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Asperger syndrome (AS) is a pervasive neuro-developmental disorder on the autism spectrum that is characterized by severe social interaction problems, cognitive inflexibility/restricted interests and poor nonverbal communication skills (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2000). Despite skilled language, social difficulties and poor understanding of others' minds often persist through adulthood (e.g., Senju, Southgate, White, & Frith, 2009). For example, one follow-up of a group of 67 men and women who had been diagnosed with AS or high-functioning autism in childhood revealed that only a few had mastered the skills for independent living and very few had experienced a long-term couple relationship (Hofvander et al., 2009). Yet adult outcomes are highly variable among individuals with the same diagnosis. In a long-term follow-up of 26 young adults in the normative IQ range who had been diagnosed with AS or autism in childhood, Szatmari, Bartolucci, Bremner, Bond, and Rich (1989) found that whereas problems in nonverbal communication (e.g., gesture, facial expressiveness) persisted in a large majority, this did not necessarily preclude romantic couplehood. About half the sample (44%) had, in fact, experienced a close sexual relationship, one quarter had made a longer-term commitment (dating or cohabitation) and one individual (4%) had married. Similarly, Larson and Mouridsen (1997) reported on a 30-year follow-up of a small sample ( $N=9$ ) of adults diagnosed in childhood with AS. At a mean age of 39 years, 56% were currently or previously married (including long-term cohabitation) and a number of these couples were also raising children.

Given that couplehood appears possible for at least some adults with AS, further questions arise. Is the romantic attachment process different for these men and women than for married people without AS? To what extent are relationship satisfaction and the emotional experiences associated with marriage and parenthood different for adults with AS, and/or for

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their spouses, as compared with the feelings and experiences of other couples without an autism-spectrum disorder? These are some of the questions for the present research.

## 1. Marital and parenting satisfaction in families with autism

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to systematically explore satisfaction with marriage and parenting in groups of couples where one spouse has a clinically-confirmed AS diagnosis. However, several clinical case histories (e.g., Attwood, 2007) and autobiographical accounts by individuals living with AS (e.g., Grandin, 2002; Jacobs, 2003; Slater-Walker & Slater-Walker, 2002) highlight that there can be negative but also positive features of these relationships for some individuals. For example, in a narrative account of her own marriage to an AS husband, one newspaper advice columnist (Jacobs, 2003), informally questioned several other similar married couples. Respondents who had AS themselves were generally content with marriage but a number of their spouses were less positive: “Their mental health had significantly deteriorated due to the relationship. They felt emotionally exhausted and neglected” (Attwood, 2007, p. 310).

While case histories and anecdotal accounts like these are not only insightful but also rich sources of testable hypotheses, there is a dearth of well-controlled empirical study of the marital quality of couples with AS. Our goal was therefore to systematically investigate relationship quality in such couples using standard, well-validated marital quality instruments and appropriate control groups. Specifically, we examined three relationship dimensions (adult attachment style, marital quality and parenthood satisfaction) that are widely deemed to be core features of healthy family and couple functioning and individual wellbeing (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1994; Noller, Feeney, & Peterson, 2001; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2008). To explore how having AS might shape relationship functioning in each of these key areas, we focussed on a target group of 22 men and women who themselves had a DSM-IV-based AS diagnosis (APA, 2000) that had been clinically-confirmed independently of this research. We also compared them with three distinct, theoretically-selected control groups, namely: (a) neuro-typical adults who were married to, and living with, both a spouse and a child with clinically-confirmed AS, (b) neuro-typical parents whose child (but not spouse) had AS, and (c) matched spouses in non-clinic households with no AS in either generation.

Our rationale for these empirical choices was grounded in a limited amount of indirectly relevant previous research that can be briefly outlined as follows.

## 2. Child autism and family relationship quality

Despite there being no known past studies sharing the present focus on the marital quality among spouses who themselves have AS, there has been a small amount of research on the marital satisfaction of neuro-typical parents with an AS child. For example, using a large national survey sample, Montes and Halterman (2007) selected 364 mothers who reported their child had been suspected of having autism (though not necessarily officially diagnosed). At an individual level, these mothers reported significantly higher levels of stress and poorer mental health than mothers in the general population, even after controlling for demographic factors. Yet their self-reported marital functioning (conflict-resolution style, disagreement frequency, closeness to spouse and frequency of domestic violence) was no different from that of respondents with no children with autism. Lee (2009) likewise found that, despite their low scores for shared leisure pursuits, respondents with children with autism did not differ significantly from control parents of children without disabilities. Brobst, Clopton, and Hendrick (2009) compared 25 couples whose child had an autism-spectrum disorder to 20 non-clinic controls and found large differences in parenting stress, a marginally significant difference in total marital satisfaction and no differences at all on scales of marital commitment, spousal support or feelings of respect for spouse.

All in all, then, these studies suggest, somewhat unexpectedly, that spouses' marital satisfaction may not be as drastically undermined by the challenge of rearing a child with an autism-spectrum disorder as has commonly been supposed. Indeed, quality of marriage may actually serve as a protective factor mediating the adverse link between a child's disability and parents' emotional wellbeing. For example, Kersh, Hedvat, Hauser-Cram, and Warfield (2006) studied marital satisfaction and parents' personal levels of stress and distress in families with children who had a wide range of disabilities. These included, but were not limited to, disorders on the autism spectrum. They found that whereas parents of disabled children generally reported more personal mental health problems and greater parenting stress than control parents whose children had no disabilities, a high quality marriage could serve as an antidote. Those mothers and fathers of disabled or nondisabled children who reported high levels of marital satisfaction had lower levels of personal stress and depressive symptoms than other parents, irrespective of whether or not their child had autism or any other disability.

A construct that is closely related to marital satisfaction is parenthood satisfaction. The latter term describes the overall balance of positive affective feelings (like pride, confidence and joy) relative to negative emotions (anger, self-doubt, sadness) that mothers and fathers gain from the parenting role (Johnston & Mash, 1989). In one study of neuro-typical parents, Benson and Karlof (2009) assessed levels of parenting satisfaction and stress, together with other possible sources of satisfaction in adults' lives (including careers, hobbies, marriage, finances). For mothers and fathers whose child had an autism-spectrum disorder, longitudinal analyses showed that other life dimensions mediated the impact of the severity of the child's symptoms upon parental depression over time. Hoffman, Sweeney, Hodge, Lopez-Wagner, and Looney (2009) compared mothers of children diagnosed with autism to a control group of mothers of age-matched typically developing

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